

Kenya's elephant emergency: with poaching on the rise, what has happened to the infants left behind?

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With poaching on the rise and continued human encroachment, Kenya's elephants face a precarious future unless something more is done. But for now, the littlest survivors need our help!

During my visit to Kenya last year, the opportunity arose to visit Dame Daphne Sheldrick's wildlife orphanage in Nairobi National Park. I was thrilled with the prospect since I had adopted two orphans, Makena and Kenia, but ten minutes into the visit I realized I wasn't prepared for the reality of their situation.

We huddled near a rope fence separating us from the small herd of orphans and their keepers. As we listened to the keepers tell tales about their charges, some of the visitors around me couldn't contain their tears while others smiled, yet seemed subdued. I wondered if anyone would adopt one of these precious babies, and I wondered how long I could keep my emotions in check. All I wanted was to slip under the rope and give Kenia a hug.

What is it about elephants and especially the babies that is so endearing? It's not that we can cuddle with them on our laps. Perhaps we remember Babar the Elephant books and cartoons, or maybe it's our initial contact with zoo elephants that seem so mournful and alone. Maybe it's their enormous presence melded with a sense of kindness that evokes maternal instinct.

Whatever it is, elephants have always intrigued me, but until my first trip to Kenya years ago I had never seen elephant families.

During our first game drive we found herds foraging among the trees and scattering dirt over their backs to keep cool. The youngest infants stayed near their mothers while older ones and adolescents frolicked around much like our preschoolers and grade-schoolers. When the youngsters became unruly a family member would give them a nudge as if to put them in their place – like sitting in a corner or going to your room. They seemed almost human, and I felt like an intruder.

I'm no elephant expert and would never profess to be, but I am an expert at being a mom. I know having extended family members and grandparents around for support when raising a child is invaluable.

I know what panic feels like when my son and I lost each other for a few minutes in a department store and later when I clutched him I saw the terror in his tear filled eyes. Even though he was very young he remembered that incident for years.

I can't even conceive of what it would feel like to lose a child.

What must an infant elephant feel when he somehow ends up at the bottom of a well frantically scraping the sides trying to escape, bellowing for mom, but no answer. Or what must a baby feel like when his mother lies prostrate on the ground, her blood staining rust colored earth, tusks gone. He struggles to nurse, then tries to climb on top of her, but she doesn't move. Frantic, he whirls around nudging her. He finally bellows.

Kenia's saga played out six weeks prior to my visit when a farmer found her near a densely populated farming community on the foothills of Mt. Kenya. It appeared the herd had panicked, and in the confusion Kenia was left.

Now she stood, body slumped, eyes void of expression in her new surroundings at the orphanage. Other orphans tried to coax her to play but she remained still, trunk limp. Her anguish tore at my heart and I wondered if she would survive. The keepers said that she had been ill and they were very concerned.

The orphans' physical and emotional wounds can take an interminable amount of time to heal, and sometimes even with drastic veterinary intervention their bodies just give out. Since their mental and physical status can change at a moment's notice, and with dietary needs so complex, the keepers must live with them 24/7.

Without Dame Daphne Sheldrick, the growing number of orphans slowly being integrated into the wild herds in Tsavo National Park would not exist.

Tsavo once was home to Kenya's largest population of elephants, but by 1990, 95 percent of the population had been annihilated by poachers.

Many years ago, Sheldrick lived in Tsavo and it was there that she started rehabilitating orphans. When I look back at her life's journey and how her work has become an integral part of conservation efforts in East Africa and around the world, it's evident that in destiny, timing is perfect.

The work of the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust continues with a sense of urgency. Several de-snaring units combat the illegal bushmeat trade, mobile veterinary units have been created in conjunction with the Kenya Wildlife Service, and community outreach projects and conservation programs are ongoing.

During the past year poaching has accelerated creating a population explosion of 18 infants at the orphanage – the most they have ever had at any given time.

Also throughout the past year Kenia has thrived and now nurtures younger orphans. But she is growing up and soon the keepers will move her into one of the Trust's stockades in Tsavo – the next step on her journey to freedom.

There are two schools of thought why poaching has increased, but whatever the thought, the end result is still the same: families are slaughtered and infants become orphans.

It isn't just the poaching that is causing the decline of the African elephant. Many factors including human encroachment also contribute to the crisis, so solutions don't come easy.

As I write this, 20 more elephants have been poached in Northern Kenya just within the past two weeks.

If we don't take care of our planet and our co-inhabitants, who will?

Do we want to be the only species left on earth? After all, this life is a gift for all.

Humanity has always come up with solutions – let's solve this problem together so our grandchildren will still see elephants in the wild where they belong.

Formula and care for the orphans is expensive so please go to the Trust's web site and find that special infant or older orphan to adopt. For just \$50.00 a year you are giving a precious pachyderm a chance.

Or think about joining one of the conservation groups mentioned below, or donate your time on a volunteer vacation such as Earthwatch.

To sum it up:

In her book "The Orphans of Tsavo" Dame Daphne Sheldrick says, "I have found in my orphans the same individuality that marks every member of the human race, and I have come to look upon them, not as four-legged machines put here for the benefit of mankind, but as creatures with as much right to enjoy the world God gave them as we have."

Important Links:

Sheldrick Wildlife Trust	www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org
Cynthia Moss and the Amboseli Elephants	www.elephanttrust.org
East African Wildlife Society	www.eawildlife.org
BornFree Foundation	www.bornfree.org.uk
Wildlife Conservation Network	www.wildlifeconservationnetwork.org
Lewa Conservancy	www.lewa.org
Wildlife Direct	www.wildlifedirect.org
Earthwatch	www.earthwatch.org
World Wildlife Fund	www.worldwildlife.org